

[Sally Pollak, Burlington Free Press](#)

As a crew of cyclists set off from a snowy Intervale farmyard Thursday afternoon, pedaling bicycles equipped with studded snow tires to deliver CSA shares to localvores, Rep. Peter Welch, D.-Vt., met with about 20 Vermonters to discuss local agriculture, regional food systems, and access to healthy and nutritious foods.

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Welch, who picked beets at Intervale Community Farm in October, did no farm work Thursday. But he went on a mini-tour of Burlington's agricultural district. His visit included a look at the barn from which Food Hub CSA (community supported agriculture) shares are distributed by cyclists who haul up to 300 pounds of food, raised at 24 local farms.

After taking particular interest in the frozen blueberries from Adam's Berry Farm, Welch went into the Intervale Center's offices to talk to farmers, nutritionists, food advocates and other experts. He said he's interested in ideas about what works, and what doesn't, in Vermont's agriculture community. As a new member of the House Agriculture Committee, Welch is on a month-long listening tour.

People are wondering what it means to be a minority member of the newly elected House, Welch said.

"I'm here to report that I've been promoted to the Agriculture Committee," Welch said. "And it's very exciting."

He wanted to learn Thursday about specific issues, policies and programs that are effective in

producing local, nutritious foods, and ensuring their accessibility. Welch wanted to learn, as well, about the roadblocks to success.

"I need Vermont ideas that I can bring to Washington and have become part of public policy," Welch said. He was particularly interested in concrete examples from Vermont's farming community that work, Welch said.

Among the topics discussed:

- Doug Davis, director of food service for the Burlington School District, reported that nearly 40 percent of the food served in the school district is locally sourced or produced. This week, for the first time, beef became part of the district's local foods: 2,200 pounds of Addison County beef, produced without hormones or antibiotics, was processed for use by the district, Davis said. "What we have to do is create a generation of consumers," Davis said. "I don't think there's a better way to do that than to get school-age children eating locally."

This kind of healthful eating in childhood promotes and develops good eating habits over a lifetime, and helps to produce adult consumers who opt for local, nutritious food, Davis said.

- Andy Jones, farm manager of the 530-member Intervale Community Farm, where he has worked 17 years, talked about the value and success of "bottom-up" programs that are designed for and tailored to local needs, and implemented with flexibility.

"Those things are critical in making Vermont agriculture work," Jones said.

These programs include rural development initiatives, and work done by organizations like NOFA-Vermont and Vermont FEED (Food Education Every Day), he said.

"These are very successful programs that are not getting a lot of funding," Jones said. "One of my personal favorites is SARE (Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education) Northeast.

The farmers on the ground are the ones figuring out the solutions."

- Diane Imrie, director of nutrition services at Fletcher Allen Health Care, noted the Burlington hospital's national lead in serving healthy foods to people in health-care settings. Fletcher Allen has trained some 75 hospitals nationwide on how and why to use local foods in hospitals.

For drafting a farm bill that takes health into account, Imrie had a recommendation for Vermont's sole congressman.

"Encourage and support more fruit and vegetable production," Imrie said. "I don't know if it gets any more basic than that."